**[Reforming school exams](https://www.dawn.com/news/1798005/reforming-school-exams)**

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THE school exam is the cornerstone of any educational system which is responsible for assessing the academic performance of students based on a prescribed curriculum and textbooks, certifying that the students have met certain standards, and evaluating the education system’s performance for the purposes of accountability.

School exams exert a powerful influence on the lives of students, but have, unfortunately, not played their due role in accomplishing the aim of education. Transforming such exams has been the focus of national education policies but up until now, apart from some cosmetic changes, no systemic exam reform has been carried out in the country. Also, no external review of the school exam system has been conducted so far to examine its efficacy and effectiveness. As a result, an old exam system with some cosmetic changes has prevailed.

Owing to the high-stakes implications for students, exam systems have a responsibility to ensure the sound quality of the exams, the integrity of processes and the accuracy of results. However, in Pakistan, stakeholders, especially parents and students, have expressed utter dissatisfaction with the existing system since it is found to be lacking in assessing a wide range of learning outcomes, and doesn’t ensure fairness, transparency, credibility, and accuracy in exam results, thanks to excessive cheating, malpractice, and corruption. This criticism has been going on for the last several decades, but no real effort has yet been made to bring about improvement in school exams.

Public boards don’t have a written exam policy based on national exam standards including automation, test specifications, and standard operation procedures. According to the media and official inquiries, exam papers are mainly prepared on the basis of exam papers of the past five years, and focus on assessing cognitive skills of a lower order. Because of the lack of an effective security system, papers are leaked from exam boards, answer scripts are marked by untrained and irrelevant examiners without scoring rubrics, the results are often tampered with, inflated grades are awarded, and the results are delayed. Such is the rot that even students who acquire high grades are often not able to pass the entry tests conducted by professional and other colleges.

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The issue led to the creation of exam boards in the private education sector. The Aga Khan University Examination Board is the first such board in the country. It has adopted a broader framework of assessment. It developed an items bank and prepared balanced question papers assessing both the lower and higher order of cognitive skills among students. The board also introduced e-marking and onscreen assessment by a group of assessors regarded as specialists in their respective subjects.

The board followed international assessment standards in the setting of question papers, and has conducted exams and marked students’ answers while maintaining zero tolerance for unethical practices. Cheating and malpractices are hardly reported in its exams, which seems to be one of its major strengths. Exam results are carefully prepared and reviewed to avoid any error. The Ziauddin University Examination Board is another private exam board which has been established for promoting fairness and transparency in school exams.

All public sector boards are autonomous bodies and have their own boards of governors. However, in each province, there is a provincial boards committee of chairmen, meeting on a quarterly basis to deliberate on exam-related matters. All exam boards have been working under the umbrella of the Inter-Board Chairmen Commission (IBCC), which is a coordinating body at the federal level to discuss exam-related matters. However, it has not yet developed a cohesive exam policy to transform the exam system, except for focusing on some policy initiatives such as the grading scheme, alternatives to assessing practical exams, choices for optional subjects, and the eligibility of students appearing in the class nine exam, etc.

Among other public exam boards, the federal exam board has taken major initiatives for transforming the system, which includes the automation of the exam system. IBCC has been coordinating with other exam boards in the country for the automation of the exam system. But this will not bring positive results unless the entire exam system is reformed and linked to the transformation of education in the country in general.

The transformation of the school exam is inevitable since the quality of education, to a large extent, depends on the quality of exams. It is imperative to change the system and prepare students better for the challenges of the 21st century. At the same time, all boards require complete restructuring in matters of governance, management, human resources, finance, quality assurance and exams.

The provincial public boards have been operating under the administrative control of their respective provincial governments, which have been mainly overseeing administrative matters, whereas there is a dire need for regulating the functions of the boards through an independent oversight body such as an ‘examination commission’ that can establish exam standards to raise the quality of exams and maintain transparency and consistency in policy and practices. This would help repair stakeholders’ broken trust.

In response to the genuine concerns of educators, policymakers, and stakeholders, there is growing consensus on the need to transform the school exam system to make it reliable, fair and transparent so that it can promote creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Only such an effort will ensure academically well-rounded students. The system must also be made credible through curbing cheating, corruption, and malpractices. Trans­forming it should be linked to changing the whole education system, which would require different kinds of leadership and managerial skills, resources, structure and approaches.

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